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MEDIA STATEMENT

CRA urges Government to retain Medevac Bill and explore options for a humane solution to plight of asylum-seekers and refugees

Seven leaders from the Catholic community in Australia formed a delegation with the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA) to travel to Papua New Guinea (PNG) recently, to see firsthand the situation of people seeking asylum/refugee status and understand their experience, so that when they returned to Australia, they could advocate for them further.

The delegation visited Bomana, a Port Moresby prison complex, where the men held in detention are denied visitors, phones, access to lawyers and have minimal rations each day. The distress is so severe that many have been placed in the psychiatric ward at a local hospital. Some have lost hope as their claims for asylum/refugee status have been rejected; or they are waiting for resettlement or medical evacuation but with no definite date. Physical and psychological deterioration is occurring at a rapid rate.

“What’s their future? Where’s their hope?” asks Mary-Clare Holland OP, one of the Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) Council members who was among the delegation and Prioress of the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and the Solomon Islands.

“Visiting a hospital, a man called out, ‘Please help me.’ I encouraged him to eat but he had lost the will to live. I felt shattered.”

“Asylum-seekers and refugees are suffering in detention. Medical facilities are grossly inadequate to deal with their physical and mental health. That’s why the Medevac Bill must remain,” said Tom McDonough CP, Provincial of the Passionist Fathers and CRA Council member, also on the delegation to PNG.

“The Medevac Bill simply provides urgent medical assistance; it is not a resettlement plan. It applies only to people still in PNG and Nauru, whose numbers are declining” added Fr Tom.

Sr Mary-Clare explained that there are 47 asylum seekers in detention in Bomana, many have been there for seven years and classified as non-refugees; they have either never applied for refugee status or their applications have been rejected. They are known in PNG as ‘the negatives’.

Fr Tom and Sr Mary-Clare report that these men are being used as a deterrent to stop others from seeking asylum/refugee status in Australia.

Refugees and asylum-seekers have endured enough; using one group of human beings as a deterrent, to modify the behaviour of others, is not a humane policy and goes against Catholic Social Teaching.

CRA urges the Australian Government to retain the Medevac Bill and find a pathway forward for those who are not currently considered refugees and are detained. One such pathway is resettlement in New Zealand.

In the spirit of Pope Francis' visit to Lampedusa, the CAPSA delegation went to be with, pray and mourn with those suffering in PNG and to advocate for them. Sr Mary-Clare and Fr Tom travelled with Bishop Vincent Long van Nguyen OFM Conv of Parramatta, Fr. Peter Smith from the Archdiocese of Sydney, Fr. Gerry Heffernan from St Anthony's parish in Brisbane, Carolina Gottardo and Joshua Lourensz from CAPSA.

The delegation has worked together to lobby politicians, advocate for the retention of the Medevac Bill, and petition for a sustainable, humanitarian solution to the plight of people on PNG and Nauru.

MEDIA ENQUIRIES

Sylvia MacRitchie-Hook
E: comms@catholicreligious.org.au
M: 0410 644 356